Religious indifference and religious education in the Netherlands: A tension unfolds

by
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Abstract

Starting from a description of the worldviews of Dutch youths, this article argues that there is a growing tension between the aims pursued in religious education in school and the predominantly secular outlook on life of present-day youths. It is shown, that one of the reasons for this tension is the fact that religious education is a confessional subject in the Netherlands which is only part of the curriculum in religiously affiliated schools. Governing bodies of religiously affiliated schools and religious pedagogues are aware of this growing tension and have responded to it by transforming religious education into worldview formation. Thus the aim of religious education is no longer to socialise students in a religious tradition, but to help them develop a religious or secular worldview of their own. But also this new approach does not resolve this tension, because it still assumes a personal interest in religion and worldview among the young. The article, therefore, argues for a more radical reformulation of the aim of religious education in strictly cognitive terms.

1. Introduction

In the Netherlands religious education in school is both self-evident and controversial. On the one hand, religious education is for long an integral part of the curriculum in most Dutch schools, while on the other hand it is increasingly considered to be out of date and irrelevant. This situation is due to the tension between two 'facts' concerning the position of religious education in Dutch schools: Dutch society is becoming a secular society, while religious education is confessional. As a result, the aim of religious education increasingly conflicts with the religious background of students. Of course, this observation is not new. For several decades now, it has caught the attention of religious pedagogues who until now tried to deal with this tension in two ways: denying the secular character of Dutch society and/or restating the aim of religious education. As yet these efforts have not been very successful and have not resulted in a growing or renewed appreciation of religious education in school. A failure which, in my opinion, is due to a too optimistic appraisal of the interest of students in religion and, as a result, a still not radical enough reformulation of the aim of religious education.

The purpose of this article is to describe the current situation of religious education in Dutch schools in more detail and to offer a more radical reformulation of its aim. To do this, I will first describe recent developments in the Dutch religious landscape with a special focus on the worldviews of Dutch youths. Despite the popular portrayal of youths as being interested in religion or spirituality, this description shows that Dutch youths are secular rather than religious or spriritual. Next, I will elucidate the position of religious education in the Dutch educational system and explain why religious education in the Netherlands is confessional. This section is followed by a brief description of the transformation of religious education into worldview formation in order to illustrate how the educational field has generally responded to the changing Dutch religious landscape. In this respect, I will also discuss some recent research findings concerning the appreciation of this new approach to religious education by Dutch youths. These findings show that current reformulations of the aim of religious education still do not take youths seriously. Finally, I will offer a more realistic aim of religious education in school. This aim is far more modest in view of the affective-

attitudinal learning outcomes religious pedagogues tend to advocate and more demanding in view of the cognitive learning outcomes. In this way, I believe, this aim is more in accordance with the present-day religious situation in Western countries like the Netherlands.

2. Secular youths in a secular Dutch society

Youngsters are, of course, influenced by the social-cultural context they grow up in. In this section, therefore, I will first describe some general trends concerning religion in Dutch society before paying attention to the religon of Dutch youngsters. The section closes with a reflection on the most important findings.

2.1   Religion in Dutch society between 1966 and 2011

		1966 %	1979 %	1996 %	2006 %	2011 %
Religious affiliation	Roman-Catholic	35	29	21	16	15
	Protestant	25	22	19	14	10
	Other[1]	7	6	7	9	10
	No-affiliaiton	33	43	53	61	64
Church attendance	Every week	50	31	21	16	11
	Sometimes	7	13	13	14	7
	Seldom	8	16	26	23	25
	Never	35	40	40	47	60
Religious belief[2]	Personal God	47	33	24	24	26
	Impersonal higher power	31	40	39	36	32
	Doubts existence	16	18	27	26	---
	There is no God / higher power	6	9	10	14	---

Table 1: religious affiliation, church attendance and religious belief in the Netherlands between 1966-2011[3]

The social-cultural context Dutch youngsters grow up in is clearly characterized by an ongoing process of secularisation. Table 1 displays trends in religious affiliation, church attendance and religious belief in the Netherlands between 1966 and 2011. Overall, the trends point to religious decline. Between 1966 and 2011 the number of

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[1]   The category 'other' refers to smaller Christian denominations as well as to Muslims, Jews and adherents of eastern religions like Hinduism or Buddhism.

[2]   The question posed here was: "Which of the following statements matches best your personal conviction?", after which the respondents had to choose between: "There is a God who occupies himself with every person", "There exists a higher power who controls life", "I do not know if God or a higher power exists" and "There is no God or higher power."

[3]   The figures from 1966 to 2006 are from the longitudinal research 'God in the Netherlands' and are representative for the Dutch population of 17 years and older, see BERNTS ET AL. 2007. The figures of 2011 are from the research 'Social Cultural Trends in the Netherlands' (SOCON) and are representative for the Dutch population of 18 years and older. Apart from this small difference concerning the sample the questionnaires used in both research projects are identical.

people with no-affiliation almost doubled, while the numbers of Catholics and Protestants more than halved. Only the number of other-affiliates slightly increased, which is probably due to the increasing number of Muslims in Dutch society.[4] When it comes to church attendance, the picture is more or less the same. Regular church attendance is becoming rare in the Netherlands, while no-attendance is becoming the norm. The picture is slightly different with regard to religious belief. Although belief in a personal God declined between 1966 and 1996, it is stable ever since. Nowadays, one in four Dutch claims to believe in a personal God. And when it comes to the belief in an impersonal higher power, even one in three Dutch claims that this is his or her conviction. In this respect, the Dutch religious landscape seems to develop towards a situation of 'believing without belonging', to use Davie's catchy phrase.[5]

The above figures only relate to traditional, institutional forms of religion. However, as an alternative for the secularisation-thesis scholars nowadays also mention the transformation of religion in modern society. A well-known example of the latter is the Kendal-research of Heelas and Woodhead in which they investigate the possible transformation of religion into spirituality in Britain.[6] They indeed find that religion is in decline and that alternative forms of spiritualiy are on the rise. But they also find that the loss of traditional religion is not compensated by the growth of the so-called spiritual domain. Consequently, despite religious transformation, the overall picture is secularisation. This situation also applies to the Netherlands. Becker and De Hart studied the familiarity with and acceptance of, what they called, paracultural themes; like astrology, foretelling and the consultation of alternative medecine. They too found that the familiarity with and acceptance of these themes has indeed increased among the Dutch, but without these themes also becoming more incorporated into the daily lives of the Dutch.[7]

In sum, the majority of Dutch youths grow up in an increasingly secular environment. With the exception of youngsters belonging to smaller orthodox Christian denominations and Muslims, Dutch youths grow up in a cultural environment in which belonging to a religious community and attending religious services is rare and certainly no longer the social norm. Nor do Dutch youths live in a cultural environment in which it has become common practice to occupy oneself with alternative forms of religion or belief. Only the belief in a higher power controlling life seems to have a certain degree of social plausibility. How has this situation affected the religious worldview of Dutch youngsters?

2.2 Youth and religion in the Netherlands

Addressing the above question is not easy. Although the religion of Dutch youths is relatively well researched, it is hard to compare studies due to differences regarding the defintion and operationalisation of 'religion' and the use of different age groups. Nevertheless, I will try to describe some general findings found in the Netherlands relating both to the involvement of youths in institutional religion and to non-institutional practices. In order to be able to detect some sort of trend, I will discuss

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[4] Recent research also showed that there is no secularisation among Muslims. Whereas the frequency of visiting the mosque declined between 1998 and 2002 it again increased between 2002 and 2011 among first and second generation Turkish and Moroccan muslims, resulting in a net effect of no decline. See MALIEPAART / GIJBERTS 2012.
[5] See for instance DAVIE 2007.
[6] See HEELAS / WOODHEAD 2005.
[7] See BECKER / DE HART 2006, 80-92.

three research projects conducted respectively in the eighties, the nineties and during the past decade.

In 1983 De Hart conducted a large scale representative survey into the religious and political activities of Dutch secondary school students in the higher grades of pre-college or pre-university programmes. Religious and political beliefs and convictions were not considered.[8] Regarding their religious activities, these students within the age range from 15 to 19 were questioned among other things about their religious affiliation, church attendance, the frequency of prayer, about their affinity with new religious movements as well as about their familiarity with alternative religious practices. Already in 1983 it appeared that less than 30% of these youngsters were affliliated to a religious denomination, that only approximately 27% attended church at least two times a month, that only 15% took part in religious activities next to attending church., 29% reported to pray regular to often, t93% of these students did not have any affinity to new religious movements like TM, scientology, hare krishna or anthroposophy; 50% said they were familiar with alternative religious practices, like yoga, reincarnation, astrology and the like, without, however, attributing much significance to them. Summarising his findings De Hart concludes the following.[9] First, institutional religious practices are related to non-institutional practices. That is to say, religious disaffiliation also negatively affects the students' involvement in non-instititutional practices like prayer. Second, the students' familiarity with and interest in alternative relgious movements and practices is modest and does not point at a reversal in the ongoing process of secularisation. Third, non-affiliates do not compensate their lack of a religious affiliation with a relatively strong interest in alternative religious movements and practices. And fourth, interest in alternative religious movements and practices is strongest among those students who are also the most involved in institutional religious practices. Thus, alternative religious movements and practices not so much constitute a 'religious alternative' for the non-affiliates, but rather supplement the traditional religious outlook of the affiliates.[10]

The overall picture emerging from De Hart's study concerning a large proportion of Dutch youths in 1983, is a picture of religious decline and disaffiliation. In large part, this picture is confirmed by the study of Pieper and Vermeer among students in Catholic secondary schools.[11] Their data, gathered in winter 1997 – 1998, point at a continuous process of religious disaffiliation with only 20% of the students in Catholic schools describing themselves as Catholic, with 28% describing themselves as non-religious and 19% as atheists, and only 24% considering themselves as a member of a Christian denomination. Also when it comes to church attendance, the trend is decline. Whereas De Hart reported that in 1983 approximately 29% of the Dutch youths in the higher levels of secondary education attend church at least two times a month, fifteen years later Pieper and Vermeer found that no more than 9% of the students in Catholic schools attend church at least once a month. But when it comes to personal belief things are different with almost 40% of these students reporting to

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[8]   See DE HART 1990.

[9]   See ibid., 111.

[10] In 2007 I re-interviewed a subsample of the original sample of De Hart (these former students now being around forty) and not only found that the overall interest in alternative religious or spiritual beliefs and practices was again very low, but that these beliefs and practices especially appealed to apostates and not so much to non-affiliates. See VERMEER / JANSSEN 2011.

[11] See Pieper / Vermeer 2001. The sample they used was representative for all students, ranging from 16- to 18- year-olds, at Dutch Catholic schools in the higher grades of pre-college or pre-university programmes.

belief in a supernatural reality.[12] A finding similar to the finding regarding the Dutch population as a whole and which again seems to point to a religious situation of 'believing without belonging.'

More recent findings concerning the religious worldview of Dutch youths are discussed by Van der Tuin.[13] Analysing data from a non-representative sample of secondary school students, average age is 17, of predominantly Catholic schools from the south and the mid Netherlands, Van der Tuin shows that secularisation is again the dominant trend. When it comes to an instutional practice like church attendance, 9% of these youths attend church at least once a month. Similarly, also a non-institutional practice like personal prayer is not that popular with approximately 15% of these students reporting to pray at least once a week. And an alternative practice like meditating is sill less popular; 83% never meditate and only 3% meditates at least once a week. However, the questionnaire used by Van der Tuin also inquired after the students' own perception as a believer. And despite the low level of chuch attendance and the modest frequency of prayer, more than 27% of these students call themselves a believer while another 28% doubts this. This again shows that believing is not the same as belonging to and attending church, although it is not clear what believing actually means in this respect.[14]

2.3 Reflection

The three studies I discussed above are certainly not representative for all the studies into youth and religion that have been conducted in the Netherlands during the past decades. Still, it is justified, I believe, to draw the following general conclusions on the basis of these studies: Dutch youngsters disaffiliate massively (1); they continue to belief in the supernatural albeit in a vague sense (2) and they do not compensate their loss of traditional beliefs with a growing interest in alternative beliefs and practices (3).

Regarding the first conclusion, it becomes clear that the vast majority of Dutch youths is no longer affiliated with a religious denomination, let alone that they participate in the practices of a religious community. But what does this mean and what does it mean for the near future? In a recent overview of research into the religion of Dutch youths, Van Dijk-Groeneboer et al. estimate that 37% of the Dutch youths are member of a religious denomination, that 15 to 20% of them attend religious services at least once a month and that these figures are relatively stable for the past ten years.[15] But in light of the foregoing, this estimation and prediction seems too 'positive' to me. In part these differences can be explained by the usage of different age-groups, Van Dijk-Groeneboer et al. consider 15- to 25-year-olds as youngsters, and the almost complete absence of Muslims in the studies I discussed above,[16] but in part these differences are also due, I believe, to an underestimation by Van Dijk-

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[12] In the questionnaire used by Pieper and Vermeer no distinction was made between belief in God and belief in a supernatural reality. The question was: "Do you believe in the existence of a (personal or otherwise) God, or in the existence of a supernatural reality?"

[13] See VAN DER TUIN 2009. The data he discusses were gathered in 2003, see also note 40.

[14] Unfortunately, the question used only inquires after a self-definition as a believer, but not as a religious believer.

[15] See VAN DIJK-GROENEBOER et al. 2010, 36-43.

[16] In the studies I discussed samples were drawn from the higher levels of secondary education in the Netherlands in which Muslims are still underrepresented. And since Muslim youngsters are known to be more loyal to their religious community, this could explain the higher estimates of Van Dijk-Groeneboer et al. For more information on Muslims in Dutch society, see MALIEPAART / GIJSBERTS 2012.

Groeneboer et al. of the intergenerational character of religious commitment. For the UK, Voas and Crockett have not only demonstrated that the religious commitment of youngsters is primarily a matter of intergenerational religious transmission, but they also showed that within each generation only half of the parents are successful in this respect.[17] As a result, each generation displays lower levels of religious commitment than the previous one. Religious decline thus is predominantly generational in nature. Now, similar patterns are also found in the Netherlands,[18] which thus makes it highly unlikely that the level of commitment to institutional religion of Dutch youths has not changed during the past ten years nor that it will remain stable for the years to come. Consequently, the most probable scenario for the near future is that RE teachers in school will increasingly be confronted with students without any religious background or without any basic familiarity with a religious tradition. Possible exceptions being RE teachers in more orthodox Christian schools or in schools with a large proportion of Muslims.

The second conclusion is that religious belief is partly disconnected from the youths' involvement in a religious community. This phenomenon, which, as I have already mentioned above, Davie described in terms of 'believing without belonging, is often referred to by religious scholars and religious pedagogues as a refutation of the secularisation thesis. But is this justified? Dutch youths have definitely not become outspoken atheists, but what does it mean when they report to believe in God? Or what does it mean when they call themselves believers? Would it not be necessary, before we can rightfully label youths as 'religious', that their beliefs have a minimal impact upon their daily lives? Bruce makes this point when he explains why he still considers church attendance a good indicator for measuring religious commitment.[19] As he argues, calling oneself religious or stating that one is, for instance, a Catholic without at least sometimes attending church or performing certain basic religious practices like private prayer, is rather an indication of religious indifference, and thus of secularisation, than it is of having a religious identity. At issue here is the so-called salience of faith, which often differs from the self professed religious belief of youths. For instance, in the aforementioned study of Pieper and Vermeer 40% of the youngster reported to belief in a supernatural reality, but when asked if religion is important to their lives only 13% of these youngsters answered in the affirmative.[20] This shows that religious pedagogues should not be too optimistic when it comes to the personal interest of youngsters in religion. They should beware of the conclusion that youngsters are still willing to reflect upon their lives from a religious perspective solely on the basis that a lot of them have not converted to atheism yet.[21]

This optimism of certain religious pedagogues should also be tempered by my third conclusion. Although it is certainly true that alternative religious beliefs and practices are becoming more popular in the Netherlands, it is not the case, as I have already mentioned above, that adherence to these beliefs is now common practice among the Dutch. Moreover, among those who are involved and interested in alternative religious beliefs and practices youths are almost completely absent! The findings of

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[17] See VOAS / CROCKETT 2005.
[18] See BECKER / DE HART 2006, also GROEN / VERMEER, in press.
[19] See BRUCE 2011, 15-16.
[20] See PIEPER / VERMEER 2001. For comparison, in 1983 De Hart found that 30% of the Dutch youths considered religion of importance to their lives, which illustrates that the salience of religion has decreased among Dutch youths during the past decades. See DE HART 1990, 263.
[21] That youngsters are not that interested in existential questions regarding the meaning of life nor use religious narratives to reflect on their own identity was also confirmed in a study among 15- to 25-year-olds conducted in England. See SAVAGE ET AL. 2006.

De Hart in 1983 showing that Dutch secondary school students have almost no affinity with alternative religious beliefs and practices, was again corroborated in 2006 by Bernts et al. who found that most of, what they called, the 'new spirituals' are between 45 and 64 years.[22] But not only does the vast majority of these 'new spirituals' belong to the babyboom generation most of them are also former church members or have been socialised in the Christian faith. The current interest in alternative religious beliefs and practices thus could very well be a temporary phenomenon. If alternative religion especially appeals to people who want to leave more traditional forms of religion behind, the religious disaffiliation among younger generations logically implies that the number of those who are potentially interested in alternative religion also declines. Consequently, the idea expressed by some religious pedagogues that youths are not so much irreligious but rather are differently religious, is hardly in accordance with reality.

In view of the considerations argued above, I believe it is justified to say that most Dutch classrooms are populated by secular youths who live in a predominantly secular society. But before turning to the challenges this situation poses to religious education in school, let me first elucidate the position of religious education within the Dutch educational system as such.[23]

3. Confessional religious education within the Dutch 'dual' system

For an appropriate understanding of the way religious education is practised in the Netherlands knowledge about the Dutch educational system is indispensible. In Europe alone, educational systems differ greatly due to historical und political developments and so do the provisions for religious education.[24] In this section, therefore, I will first describe the so-called Dutch dual, educational system before explaining why religious education is confessional within this system.

3.1 The Dutch educational system

The Dutch educational system is the outcome of the so-called 'school struggle' of the nineteenth century.[25] This 'school struggle' has resulted in a very specific elaboration of the right to freedom of education, which was first established in the Dutch constitution and recognised in the Netherlands in 1848. The right to freedom of education allows churches or religious groups to establish schools and it gives parents the right to send their children to those private schools instead of public

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[22] See BERNTS ET AL. 2007, 165, also HEELAS / WOODHEAD 2005 for very similar findings with respect to their Kendal-research. However, contrary to these findings, Houtman and Mascini, using a representative sample of the Dutch population of 16 years or older, report on a negative relationship between age and affinity with New Age indicating that younger people have more affinity with New Age than older people, see HOUTMAN / MASCINI 2002. Still, this does not necessarily imply that specifically youths have more affinity with New Age. This negative association could also indicate that especially the babyboomers differ from the elderly.

[23] In this section, I repeatedly referred to the Dutch religious landscape in terms of 'believing without belonging', which is okay if one only compares trends and emphasises the different percentages for believing and belonging. However, while looking for explanations for these trends De Graaf and Te Grotenhuis have shown that believing and belonging are still strongly related in the Netherlands and that declining levels of church attendance go hand in hand with declining levels of belief. Thus, they conclude, it is highly unlikely that in the near future the Dutch religious landscape will be characterised by diverging trends of increasing disaffiliation and stable individual belief. See DE GRAAF / TE GROTENHUIS 2008.

[24] See SCHREINER 2000 for an overview of the provisions for religious education in the different educational systems in Europe.

[25] See VREEBURG 1993, 79-83, also WESTERMAN 2001.

schools. This freedom was curtailed, however, by the fact that church schools received no state funding whereas public education did; which, in turn, led to a call for state-funded religiously affiliated schools. The matter was settled in 1917 by a historic agreement, known as the 'pacification', between Christian political parties and the liberals and socialists. As from 1920, then, public schools and religiously affiliated schools have received equal funding in the Netherlands. As a result, the number of religiously affiliated schools has risen steadily throughout most of the twentieth century. This Dutch system of state-funded public and state-funded private schools is called the 'dual system' and, as shown in the table below, now includes approximately twice as many religiously affiliated as public schools.

	Primary education			Secondary education		
	Number of schools	Schools %	Students %	Number of schools	Schools %	Students %
Public	2405	32.2	30.2	186	28.2	26.2
General private schools[26]	473	6.3	7.0	100	15.2	12.8
Roman Catholic	2233	29.8	33.7	154	23.3	25.3
Protestant	1915	25.6	24.1	122	18.5	18.5
Smaller denominations[27]	354	4.7	3.4	27	4.1	5.3
Islamic	37	0.5	0.6	2	0.3	0.1
Cooperation private schools	57	0.8	0.1	5	0.8	0.5
Cooperation private and public schools	6	0.1	1.0	63	9.6	11.3
Total	7480	100.0	100.0	659	100.0	100.0

Table 2: Schools per denomination and size in 2010 (Education Council of the Netherlands)[28]

For a better understanding of the 'dual system', it is necessary to take a closer look at the differences between public schools and private or religiously affiliated schools. These differences are linked to three basic liberties: freedom of establishment, freedom of organisation and freedom of persuasion.[29] Freedom of establishment, as already explained, has to do with the right of churches (or groups of parents) to establish a school and apply for state funding. Freedom of organisation means that churches or a group of parents are free to establish a school according to their own principles and ideas and to determine the content of the curriculum. The latter, though, is limited by the standards set by the Dutch government. Finally, freedom of persuasion concerns the right to express a religious conviction or secular ideology at school. Together these basic liberties give religious bodies and parents a lot of freedom when it comes to the establishment and the government of schools. For instance, these basic liberties would give a group of Muslim parents the right to establish a Muslim school for their children (freedom of establishment), to limit the enrolment to Muslim children (freedom of organisation) and to have compulsory daily

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[26] General private schools do not have a specific religious foundation like, for example, anthroposophical schools.
[27] Smaller denominations include, among others, re-reformed schools, evangelical schools, jewish schools, hindu schools et cetera.
[28] See Education council of the Netherlands 2012, 24-25.
[29] See AKKERMANS 1997, 44.

prayers at school (freedom of persuasion). These rights and liberties do not apply to public schools. Public schools, which are established by the state, are strictly neutral with regard to religion and worldview.

3.2 Religious education in the Dutch educational system

Officially, religious education in Dutch schools is confessional, which means, that there is no religious education in public schools. Only in primary education does the law demand attention, i.e. objective attention so as not to jeopardise the neutrality of the state,[30] to the various religions and worldviews in Dutch society; but the specific religious issues don't have to be dealt with in a separate subject. As a result, most public primary schools touch on religion and worldview only in passing, in subjects such as geography or history; this is also true for public secondary schools. Separate RE classes form part of the curriculum only in religiously affiliated schools and are permitted as a legitimate expression of the school's religious identity. Thus, officially, religious education in Dutch schools is always confessional. Moreover, since it is seen as part of a school's religious identity, i.e. as an expression of the right to freedom of persuasion, religious education is not supervised by the state, because such a measure would violate the separation between church and state and the state's neutrality with regard to religion. The state, therefore, imposes no general educational aims with regard to religious education, there is no such thing as a national syllabus or curriculum and no general professional and educational requirements for RE teachers; nor is the quality of religious education classes assessed and evaluated by the school inspectorate. In short, the status of religious education is completely different from that of any other subject in public and private schools. Apart from paying the salaries of RE teachers, the Dutch state does not concern itself with religious education in any way.

4. From confessional religious education to worldview formation

The foregoing sections clearly show that the actual practice of religious education in the Netherlands is marked by a certain tension. As a provision typical of religiously affiliated schools religious education initially served as a kind of secondary religious socialisation, but today the profound secularisation of Dutch society has made it virtually impossible to continue this practice. Since there are at least twice as many religiously affiliated as public schools in the Netherlands (see Table 2) and given the fact that Dutch youths are secular rather than religious or spiritual (see section 2), it is inevitable that religiously affiliated schools also harbor a lot of secular youths with no religious background whatsoever. This is especially the case in schools affiliated to mainstream Christian denominations such as the Roman Catholic Church and the Dutch Reformed Church.[31] In these schools, religious education is officially (de jure) still a confessional subject for which the state bears no responsibility, but in actuallty (de facto) this confessional character has become very problematic.

Of course, this situation has also caught the attention of religious pedagogues, who have mostly responded by reformulating the aim of religious education in school. The way this aim is usually reformulated can best be explained with the help of Grimmitt's well-known distinction between teaching in, from and about religion.[32] In most schools affiliated to mainstream Christian denominations, today the aim of religious

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[30] See WESTERMAN 2001.
[31] See VERMEER 2010, also VREEBURG 1997.
[32] See GRIMMITT 1987.

education is not so much to educate students 'in' religion, but to educate them 'from' religion. A decisive development in this respect has been the transformation of religious education into what is now known in the Netherlands as 'worldview formation.'[33] This approach was first introduced in Catholic schools in the mid-eigthies, but later it also became popular in mainstream Prostestant schools. The core idea underlying this approach is the more or less functional notion that religion primarily serves to help people cope with existential questions; like: questions about life and death, suffering and evil, time and space, man's relationship with nature and society et cetera. These questions are considered basic to the human condition and students are taught, then, how different religious traditions as well as secular worldviews all provide answers to these questions.[34] In this way, it is assumed, students not only acquire knowledge about different religious traditions and secular worldviews, but, more importantly, they also learn to reflect upon their own lives and will develop a religious or secular worldview of their own.

Especially this latter aspect is crucial here. For several years now, governing bodies of Catholic and mainstream Protestant schools acknowledge that the aim of education in religion has become problematic as a result ofthe ongoing process of secularisation. These governing bodies, therefore, also officially endorse the worldview formation approach. For instance, the governing body for Catholic schools in the Netherlands officially stated in 1998, that the overall aim of religious education is to help students to develop a personal worldview or philosophy of life.[35] Hence, it no longer stated that the aim of religious education should be the teaching of Catholic or Christian faith (teaching in), but neither did it state that acquiring knowledge of various religious traditions and worldviews should be the primary aim of religious education (teaching about). Consequently, whereas education in religion is no longer considered feasible, education about religion is not considered desirable. Instead, by emphasising the worldview formation approach religiously affiliated schools opt for a strong neo-humanist pedagogical orientation. The main obejctive of religious education is to enable students to come to a better understanding of themselves through interaction with various religious traditions as part of the surrounding culture, less to transmit knowledge and to instill a concern for reason. In this way, education is seen as a process in which both the subject of learning, i.e. the student, and the object of learning, i.e. the various religious traditions and worldviews present in the surrounding culture, are opened up in a reciprocal relationship.[36] ISumming up, the general response in the educational field to the changes in the Dutch religious

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[33] For an overview of recent developments in religious education in the Netherlands and the emergence of the concept of worldview formation, see ALII 2009, 169-178, also TER AVEST ET AL. 2007.

[34] These questions are in large part similar to the questions mentioned in the first section of The Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate* of the Second Vatican Council, which clearly reflects the Catholic origin of this approach. Likewise, references are also made to the work of the Catholic theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, who described at least part of these questions as 'anthropological constants' as to express that these questions are inextricably part of the human condition, see SCHILLEBEECKX 1982, 674-681.

[35] See Dutch Catholic School council (NKSR) 1998, 16. In Belgium a similar approach was introduced in 1999 with the introduction of a new curriculum for Christian, i.e. Catholic, religious education. This new curriculum has been criticised by some for still being too Christian, while others maintain that it is not Christian enough. Recently, the Belgium theologian Boeve defended this new curriculum against these contrasting criticisms and, among other things, mentioned three preconditions for a good implementation of this curriculum to ensure that its ambitious objections are reached. These preconditions concern the RE teacher, the school and the church, but, remarkably, Boeve completely ignores the students in this respect. He simply presupposes that students, like all humans, are in one way or another always involved in a religious quest. See BOEVE 2012.

[36] See for this neo-humanist pedagogical orientation KLAFKI 1996.

landscape is to advocate a more or less broad approach to religous education aiming at the worldview formation, or Bildung, of students. But does this transformation of confessional religious education into worldview formation really resolve the tension between the initial confessional nature of religious education and the secularising worldviews of youths? A brief look at recent research into the views of Dutch youths on religious education suggests it does not.

Over the past few years there have been several inquiries into the views of Dutch students on religious education at school. As part of the REDCo project, which is a comparative study of the practice of religious education in several European countries,[37] Ter Avest et al. and Bertram-Troost et al. have studied the views of Dutch students in this regard.[38] Their results show, first of all, that while most Dutch students do not attach personal importance to religion or hardly discuss religious topics with their friends, they do regard religion as an important subject that should be studied at school.[39] They consider it important, because knowledge of the Christian faith and other religions enhances general knowledge and understanding of the world, which in turn increases respect and understanding for people from different faiths. When it comes to their own personal development, however, most students are not much concerned with religion and religious education. Consequently, Dutch students in particular seem to prefer a 'teaching about' approach concerning religious matters rather than an 'learning from' approach, let alone a 'teaching in' approach. As part of the Religious and Life Perspectives (RaLP) project, a comparative study of the religiosity and worldviews of young people in Europe, Van der Tuin also asked Dutch secondary school students about their views on religious education.[40] His findings confirm the REDCo results: Dutch students prefer a more 'objective' approach to religious education, one that distances it from their own lives.

It has to be admitted that the results of the REDCo and RaLP projects are based on very small samples and probably do not represent all Dutch students at religiously affiliated schools. Nevertheless, these findings are in line with earlier findings regarding the so-called salience of faith previously mentioned . They also confirm what Savage et al found for the UK;[41] i.e. youths are not that interested in existential questions, let alone that they use religious narratives to find purpose and meaning in life or to construct a worldview of their own. In my opinion, therefore, although the transformation of religious education into worldview formation expresses an authentic desire of those responsible for religious education in religiously affiliated schools to connect with present-day youths, it still does not take youths seriously enough.

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[37] See JACKSON ET AL. 2007.

[38] See TER AVEST ET AL. 2008, also BERTRAM-TROOST ET AL. 2009.

[39] However, in contrast to these REDCo findings, in a survey conducted in 2012 by a Dutch commercial nationwide coaching institute for homework, 40% of the secondary school students that were interviewed answered that religious education should not be part of the school's curriculum. Although these students are certainly not representative for all Dutch secondary school students and only responded to one question, i.e. "Which subject would you remove from school if you were the minister of education?", findings like these still show that religious education is not a popular subject. The Dutch report can be found here: URL: http://www.studiekring.nl/school-en-leren/uitslag-huiswerkenquete-leerlingen-liever-gamedesign-dan-godsdienst [Zugriff: 25.05.2013].

[40] See VAN DER TUIN 2009, also note 13.

[41] SAVAGE ET AL. 2006, also section 2.3 of this paper.

5. An alternative aim: acquiring cognitive instruments for understanding religion

On the basis of the foregoing, my proposal for a more cognitive approach to religious education does not come as a surprise. As I have tried to show, in a large part of the religiously affiliated schools in the Netherlands the situation is such that most students are religious illiterates. Also, they are not particularly interested in reflecting upon their own lives from a religious perspective. On this basis, a worldview formation approach seems to be problematic. The popularity of this approach in religiously affiliated schools and among religious pedagogues is understandable from the perspective of a theological anthropology, which pictures man as a sense seeker who only finds ultimate meaning and fulfillment in a relationship with the divine.[42] Whether such view of man is plausible or not - considerung religious education in Dutch schools on a theological-anthropological basis has had a serious negative consequence, namely the underevaluation of cognitve approaches to religious education which do not explicitly aim at the formation of the whole person. And this is a pity because discussing religion in a systematic and more detached way still has great educational value.

Explaining the educational value of discussing religion in school is not difficult. Education basically serves the transfer of culture and values form one generation to the next. Hence, every generation faces the question: Which cultural elements and which values deserve to be passed on to our children?[43] In view of this question, skills like reading, writing and arithmetic come to mind, but culture includes also knowledge of the political system, history, literature as well as of religion. These basic cultural elements deserve to be discussed and passed on in school, because they are requirements for an independent and autonomous citizen. Religion is important, because it is, for instance, impossible to understand the history of the Netherlands, or for that matter, of Europe, without basic knowledge of Christianity and Islam. Likewise, it is impossible to be able to understand world literature or Dutch literature without basic knowledge of various religious traditions.[44] But this so-called cultural-pedagogical defence of paying attention to religion in school not necessarily requires a separate subject in school.

Recently, I have defended religious education as a separate subject from a cultural-historical perspective on learning and development.[45] I argued that school learning may contribute to the cognitive development of students not by learning facts, but by learning general principles and rules. General principles and rules are cognitive instruments students can use to deal with a variety of situations. Applied to religious education this means, that students should not so much learn religious facts, but should acquire the basic principles, meta-concepts and thinking skills underlying the academic study of religion. As a result, I stated the overall aim of religious education as follows: "To acquire a set of cognitive instruments originating from the academic study of religion, necessary for the understanding of religion as a socio-cultural phenomenon." [46] In this way, students enhance their capacity for gathering information about religion, for understanding religion and for thinking about religion

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[42] For an example see BOEVE 2012.

[43] See MEIJER ET AL. 1997.

[44] Due to the principle of Laïcité there is no religious education in French public schools, but since the late eighties similar arguments have resulted in a renewed discussion about the teaching of religious issues in the French educational system. See WILLAIME 2007.

[45] See VERMEER 2012.

[46] See ibid., 399.

and religious controversies. Especially in secular societies in which religious illiteracy is growing, it is of the utmost importance that students learn to make informed judgments about religion. Just as students acquire cognitive instruments in other subjects like history, literature or mathematics and, for instance, learn to reflect on the causes and consequences of historic events, on the meaning of a poem or learn to solve an equation, students should also acquire cognitive instruments in religious education. This enables them, for instance, to come to a more nuanced understanding of religious controversies around issues like homosexuality or abortion, to a better understanding of the sacredness of religious rituals or of the meaning of sacred texts. Acquiring basic principles, meta-concepts and thinking skills originating from the academic study of religion thus grants students better access to the religious phenomena present in the surrounding culture, which is of great educational value. But in order to achieve this, it is also necessary, I believe, to consider religious education as a real discipline to be taught in separate religious education classes.[47]

Pursuing the aforementioned aim not only has educational value because it enhances knowledge of specific religious traditions, but also because it offers students the necessary cognitive tools for dealing with religious phenomena in a variety of situations. In addition, because this aim allows for a more objective or detached approach to religion in the classroom, it is also more in accordance with the predominantly secular outlook of Dutch youths. Therefore, I consider this alternative aim more realistic and feasible. But I also admit that this aim is of a very cognitive nature and as such does not address the student as a whole person. For this reason, some may reject this aim and opt for the worldview formation approach. The latter I can still understand, because my objections against this approach are not so much a matter of principle, but are predominantly empirical. Considering the developments in the Dutch religious landscape and the way this has affected the student population in religiously affiliated schools, I simply consider the worldview formation approach to be a dead end. But those who oppose to my proposal could perhaps find some reassurence in the notion, that also cognitive learning always affects the student as a person. Learning only happens when new knowledge can be connected with 'old' knowledge. Thus acquiring cognitive tools for dealing with religious phenomena, in the end, also changes the learner as a person. In this respect, there can never be an absolute distinction between learning about and learning from religion.[48]

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[47] Regarding this idea of religious education as a discipline, see ERRICKER 2010, 99.
[48] For an interesting discussion about the relationship between learning about and from religion, see HELLA / WRIGHT 2009.

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